

Louv to speak on children's nature deficit

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Richard Louv, the best-selling author who coined the term "nature-deficit disorder," will visit Charlotte next week to talk about reconnecting children with nature.

After a Tuesday night appearance at a Catawba Lands Conservancy event, Louv will speak Wednesday, Oct. 14, at the Freedom Park band shell to help launch the N.C. Children and Nature Coalition. Hosted by the local Sierra Club, his noon talk will be free to the public.

Louv exchanged e-mails recently with environment writer Bruce Henderson; Louv's comments are edited for brevity.

Q: Your book "Last Child in the Woods" poses a question from one of your sons: "Dad, how come it was more fun when you were a kid?" Is fun what's missing from kids' outdoors experience?

Social and technological changes in the past three decades have accelerated a dramatic shift to indoor activities, even as research suggests that children and young people who regularly experience nature play are healthier, happier and test better in school.

Recent research also suggests that exposure to nature can improve all children's cognitive abilities and resistance to negative stresses and depression.

Q: Is there a "cutoff" age where it's too late to get kids interested?

It's never too early - or too late - to teach children to appreciate the outdoors, although the earlier the better, in my view.

Harvard professor Edward O. Wilson suggests that human beings are innately attracted to nature, and that we need experiences in nature for our psychological, physical and spiritual health. Other scientists suggest the connection with nature is part of our humanity. Some of us don't or haven't had the same opportunities to connect with nature while growing up, but we can certainly make choices later on about what's important to us. For example, a teen who may have missed out on exploring the outdoors can pick up a guidebook from the library and go birding in the backyard..

Q: Given the choice of 30 minutes in the school day devoted to environmental education or a half-hour of play time outside, which would you recommend?

We shouldn't need to choose. Studies of creativity show that kids who play in natural or naturalized play areas are far more likely to invent their own games, far more likely to play cooperatively. Children who have nature-play experience also test much higher in science. It just doesn't make sense to suppress a child's inborn urge to play and through that play develop diverse mental and physical skills. In the ideal scenario, new schools should be designed with nature in mind, and old schools refitted with playscapes that incorporate nature.

Q: What role do you think video games and computers play?

It's too easy to blame the nature deficit on video games. It's true that children and youths in the U.S. between the ages of 8 and 18 spend an average of 6.5 hours a day with electronic media, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

But if we focus only on electronics, we'll probably push kids toward the forbidden fruit - video games. Also, we'll be sidestepping a deeper discussion of the other causes ... such as parental fear, the over-organized childhood, the devaluing of unstructured play and overall societal priorities. All have huge implications when it comes to children's ability to play freely, to experience nature.

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